EARL QUAY

A BASIC FACTOR IN REHABILITATION OF THE BLIND

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REHABILITATION REVIEW

Important

In this issue of the REHABILITATION REVIEW-BULLETIN, we are very happy to be able to present to you an article on the rehabilitation of the blind. This has come to us through the courtesy of Mr. Philip N. Harrison, the Executive Secretary of the Pennsylvania Association for the Blind, which has its headquarters in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. It is written by Mr. Quay. Mr. Quay has wide experience in the work for the blind in several States and in Puerto Rico.

Blindness may well be one of the first disabilities, if not the first, to receive public attention. I well remember the Perkins Institute for the Blind located then in South Boston, Massachusetts as far back as 1890. The method of helping the blind has materially changed since those days. At that time it was believed that the blind could not engage in any kind of sighted occupations nor outside the doors of an institution. That has all been changed. It was in 1928 to 1930 that the American Foundation for the Blind published a series of pamphlets pointing out opportunities for the blind in sighted occupations. The author was Lela T. Brown. The Executive Director of the Foundation at that time was Robert Irwin.

During this publication year, Volume 4, there will come to you articles by Dr. Lewis Bronstein on the cardiac, Dr. Frank Lamberta on the tuberculous, and Dr. Kurt Jochheim writing on the beginning of rehabilitation for the industrially injured in West Germany. The next issue will have an article by Dr. Jacob Rudd on the setting up of a coordinated rehabilitation program in a psychiatric hospital.

A Basic Factor in Rehabilitation of the Blind

W. EARL QUAY

Blind people, or for that matter, any handicapped people, do not cut a very fancy figure in primitive society. Nothing but a lowly role could be expected for the severely handicapped where one's standing in the community depends on ability to defend one's self against all and varied enemies, to hunt for food, or to fight the tribal enemies. We might think of a blind drudge, a tent or seine maker, or an otherwise useful worker, but in the social standing he would rate among the lowest of the group. It is no wonder that where physical perfection is the measure of the elite, the lame, the halt and the blind are discarded as unworthy in the neolithic culture. It could not be otherwise. In terms of historical time, we are not far removed from the primitive and unfortunately too many of the notions of the past plague us even today.

Those people with visual handicaps are as individual and as varied in capacities as are humans generally. Despite the variation and the marked superiority of a few, still we tend to group all blind individuals into a segregated and unworthy class. In the past, personalities such as Homer, Didymus, Milton and Saunderson emerged. More recently, Pulitzer, Huxley, Helen Keller and others surpass their fully equipped contemporaries. We look to them with wonder, but continue to retain our stereotyped notions, associating blindness with helplessness or evil. Rehabilitation

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of the blind involves adjustment of the person's abilities to function in the dark, but to a large degree, it involves also the adjustment of widespread notions about his unworthiness. A basic task in our rehabilitation work is to overcome the widespread prejudice and collectivization so that blind people can be thought of as individuals and accepted on their merit. Another task is the difficult one of providing motivation for our clients in counter to their prejudice.

Work for the visually handicapped toward giving them a position of worth in society had its beginning in the latter part of the eighteenth century. Schools for their education, along with provision of work opportunities, were initiated then. Favorable public attention focused on the achievements of pupils and workers was the first wedge entered into the solid mass of misconception and prejudice. Special schools and special workshops were in vogue through the last century and the early part of this century. The special schools turned out increasing numbers of individuals who could take their place in society and the special workshops satisfied the employment and domicile needs of many. The products of the workshops added to the wealth of the community and the public began to accept blind people in their special schools and workshops as being worthy in these places of segregation.

In 1900, the first classes for the blind were set up in the public schools of Chicago. At the beginning of this century, the first organized efforts were made to put visually handicapped workers into positions of direct competition with workers outside of the special environments. In 1904, placement workers first made regular attempts to find jobs for blind people in industry. The special schools and workshops played their important role and were an indispensable segment in the chain of progress toward gaining the acceptance of blind people as being worthy and as being individuals. Their disadvantage was that they accommodated only a few and their demonstration of the worthiness of the blind was only relative. Until the visually handicapped group could be offered opportunity for direct amalgamation with the general public, acceptance of them could not well begin. Since the beginning of this century, employment of the blind has moved slowly but steadily forward. Increasing numbers of workers are finding places of employment and finding acceptance along with their seeing neighbors. Growing numbers of students are enrolled in the public schools in their local communities, while increasing proportions of their school work are done with their seeing fellows. Both of these developments contribute to a wider understanding of these handicapped people as individuals and recognition of their real value.

Soon after the initiation of organized placement work, World War I created manpower shortages and an increasing number of visually handicapped people were given employment. These times of manpower shortage have had important effects upon placements. The number employed then in relation to the number of industrially employed blind people now was small, but it marked a beginning. Just after the war or during the time of depression when an over-abundance of manpower existed, most of those taken into industry lost their places and industrial employment of the blind was at a low ebb. When employment in the country increased, just before and during World War II, a large number of blind people were taken into industrial work. Many have retained positions gained and more have been hired. The fact that many of them are remaining in industrial employment is an encouraging indication that their demonstration of ability to work with seeing neighbors in industry is having an effect upon the general attitude toward them. Approximately 5,000 blind people are now employed in industry. The pool of capable and trained workers is in excess of that number, while general employment levels remain high. This shows a still remaining reluctance on the part of some employers to accept blind people and since employers are part of the general public, it demonstrates a continuing need for education of the general public to their capabilities.

Personnel department standards for the hiring of workers interfere with many sound placements of the blind, when their standards are often unrealistically set to categorically exclude all but physically top-notch employees. Unrealistic physical requirements are set to cover an entire industry, even when many jobs could well be performed by the handicapped. A study of the degree of vision required on jobs which might be conducted in plants by those who are familiar with visual requirements and efficiency, could not only open many job opportunities, but as a supplementary benefit, could aid in preventing difficulty or accident for those workers who have been hired and who have subsequently become handicapped visually.

In addition to surveys to determine physical demands, if the surveys could include the determination of visual demands according to degree of vision required, then work opportunities for partially sighted as well as blind workers would be found. Such a survey would have effect only in so far as the personnel hiring officers are persuaded that blind people can be effective, or in so far as the general level of acceptance has progressed. Repeatedly, we return to the thought that education of the general public to dislodge any preconceived ideas of the blind as a circumscribed group and to implant the acceptance of a blind person as an individual, is the basic task in their rehabilitation.

Although we give much of our attention to the industrial worker and center much of our discussion about rehabilitation around him, the majority of employed blind people are in other classifica-

tions. In the neighborhood of 20,000 visually handicapped people are employed, with some 5,000 of them in competitive industrial employment. The blind musician, piano tuner, masseur or small storekeeper were more or less recognized before industrial placement was open to the blind. Now attorneys, teachers, engineers, etc. are found, along with agricultural workers, salesmen, skilled craftsmen, businessmen of many types and homemakers and housewives. A listing of the occupations of the employed blind contains a variety so wide that the mere listing becomes a volume and it contains inconceivable heterogeneity.

The self-employed and those making their own adjustment and opportunities, form a sizable group and conceivably the group who have adjusted and made their own way unknown to any agency may be equally large. With only 20,000 blind people employed in the country, out of a total blind population of more than 300,000, it is seen that much still needs to be done toward their employment.

Since the more capable blind workers are finding their way into industry and other employment, the special workshops are of necessity changing the emphasis and caliber of their work. Their offering is now less in the way of employment as an end in itself and more in training for employment. The workshops become rehabilitation training centers, teaching newly blinded people how to function as a blind person, giving work adjustment experience and training to develop skills directly usable in industry. The workshops, in most cases, act as screening centers through which individual workers progress to outside employment. The level of ability of workers is evaluated in the work situation to guide placement officers so that workers when placed, can better match the jobs found for them.

In the screening process, workers may be found who have not the ability to take a place outside of a protective environment. When this is so, then the special workshop can remain the end employment. The barriers to complete adjustment caused by the blind person's unwillingness to accept himself, or the existence of additional handicaps cause a seemingly disproportionate number of failures in the rehabilitation trials. This makes it so that the special workshops retain an over-abundance of workers who will progress no further. The workers who must remain in the special environment are the less capable ones. In contrast to the older workshops where the best industrial workers stayed where production could be efficient and relatively inexpensive, the workshops of today need higher subsidization to cover costs of training activities and production with less capable employees. Special workshops remain a necessity in the rehabilitation and employment program, in that their services are needed in screening work and in that no satisfactory outside employment can be found for a number of the less capable workers, leaving the special workshop as the only available work opportunity.

Government sources of special privilege or subsidy are of important help in furthering employment to the blind, while some other governmental regulations discriminate against them. The Barden-LaFollette Act, the Randolph-Sheppard Act, the Wagner-O'Day Act and other legislation based on a state level make work opportunities. Under the provisions of the Wagner-O'Day Act, the government purchases products produced in workshops for the blind without competitive bids; the fair market price having been set by a committee of government and lay personnel. Several states have setups for the purchase of blind-made products adding more work for the special workshops. Fifty-five of the larger workshops are affiliated in the sale of goods to the Federal Government providing some 32 million dollars of earnings to blind workers in the past 15 years. Under the provisions of the Randolph-Sheppard Act, it is possible to install vending stands and other such small businesses on government property to be operated by blind workers. In 1950, this arrangement supplied work for about 3,000 blind people throughout the country and in addition, state-controlled programs aid many more.

On the side of restriction of work of blind people under government regulations, civil service examination privileges are often denied when the job involved is such that a blind employee could readily perform the work involved. We recognize that blind people have demonstrated their ability to teach in public and other schools, but many states refuse them certification. They are denied certificates even when the instruction is to be given to blind children. Again we see that those engaged in the rehabilitation of the blind are faced with the task of adjusting public acceptance of their individual capacities.

Among the group of the blind, in the neighborhood of 75 per cent, for various reasons, are unable to enter into any kind of regular employment. The group in large part, is advanced in age, may have additional handicaps, while others make no satisfactory adjustment because their own notions of the incapability of blind people are rigid and stand in the way of adaptation. Coupled with his own attitude, the family too can block rehabilitation efforts by refusing to accept the thought of his becoming self-sufficient.

In addition to blindness, many people have additional handicaps of senility, of other physical disabilities, of geographical isolation, or they may have social ties limiting their flexibility. These additional handicaps frequently interfere with getting to places of employment. The inability of a large percentage of the blind population to get to places of employment makes it so that much of the service given to them must be

given in the home. Home teaching and therapeutic or industrial homework or home visiting are important services of the agencies, while supplying of industrial homework to individuals who are capable of quantity work in their homes is in many cases the only employment goal that can be set. Five to ten per cent of the total number might be served in this way. Costs involved in this type of service are high, but benefits to the homebound are also high and any products gained from the efforts of the homeworker are some gain to the community. This type of work opportunity for the homebound has not yet been well developed, but as the employment needs of the more fortunate segment of the group of the blind are being better satisfied, more attention is being directed toward these home enterprises.

The ultimate and perhaps never to be attained goal of workers with the blind, is to have their work become entirely unnecessary. This can be achieved only when public abhorrence of blindness has been overcome so that a blind person, without fear or assistance, can adjust his mental attitude to accept his condition, readily find the information and tools needed to adjust himself to working in the dark and proceed to obtain employment without artificial barriers being placed in his way. Under present conditions, the task of producing a wholesome attitude in the mind of a newly blinded person and in the mind of the employer who might hire that blind person, is immediate and pressing. After a person has been trained, finding a work opportunity remains a major function of the rehabilitation agency. The mechanics of teaching a person to function without sight is a lesser part of the rehabilitation and employment job now. This mechanical task would be the major one were it not for the residual taboo against blindness. Our sights must be aimed at the underlying barrier, including a general education approach. This general education should begin in the schools to which blind children might be integrated, should continue up to the employer who might be taught, without prejudice, to accept a visually handicapped person solely on his merit and to the general public of whom the blind client is one, to further individual acceptance.

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